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RESEARCH & DEBATE

IT'S A GRAY, GRAY WORLD

Nadia Schadlow

In a thought-provoking essay for the Winter 2020 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, Don Stoker and Craig Whiteside argue against the utility of two terms: *gray-zone conflict* and *hybrid war*. These terms, they explain, are intended to capture a range of political, economic, military, and technological activities that our adversaries and competitors use to shape political decisions and outcomes, but that fall below the threshold of violence. Stoker and Whiteside contend that although these constructs are “prominent and fashionable” they detract from America’s ability to think clearly about political, military, and strategic issues and “their vitally important connections.” The authors go so far as to advocate the elimination of these terms from the “strategic lexicon.”

I believe the opposite. The concepts, ideas, and activities comprising the *gray zone* as well as *hybrid war* remain quite useful, since they reflect the nature of today’s ongoing political competitions; help to explain the mind-sets and modes of operation of our adversaries and competitors; and compel a broader group of Americans to consider their role in the competitions currently under way.

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THE WORLD IS NOT BINARY

Stoker and Whiteside argue that the *gray-zone* concept feeds a “dangerous tendency to confuse war and peace.” The authors reject the idea of a “spectrum of conflict” because it “fails to delineate between war and peace”; in fact, they reject any analysis that fails to honor “the critical distinction.” They argue that *peace* and *war* are defined best in opposition to one another: when states

go to war they are “using violence to get something they want,” and most “new so-called classifications of war would be instantly killed if properly examined” through this lens.

This binary lens, however, belies the geopolitical realities we face. The world is not as neat or precise as the authors wish it to be. It is shortsighted to reject an entire set of activities that are not violent (although they may lead to violence) because they do not fit into their paradigm of the “critical distinction” between war and peace. As I have written in the past, the “space between war and peace is a landscape churning with political, economic, and security competitions that require constant attention.”¹ In the authors’ binary conception, peace is oddly static (whereas it actually is not), and all other activities must be closer to violence if they are to be considered part of war.

One need glance at only a few weeks’ worth of news to see the range of strategically competitive activities that fit into neither the war nor peace paradigm. These include China’s recent decisions to buy up U.S. firms going bankrupt because of COVID-19, so as to acquire key technologies, as well as Beijing’s disinformation campaigns related to the virus. The authors’ binary view of the geopolitical landscape seems to ignore Sun Tzu’s observation that “the perfection of strategy would be to produce a decision without any serious fighting.”

How would the authors interpret efforts by China to encourage Europeans to adopt Huawei’s telecommunications hardware—a key part of an unfolding competition over control of information and data? It is not purely “peace,” yet neither does it encompass the violence of war; however, it is strategically important. What would they call China’s building of artificial islands in the South China Sea? This is an act without violence, but one that has shifted the status quo fundamentally. Is that an act of war? Or part of a competition designed to shift circumstances in Beijing’s favor, without violence? Is that purely peaceful?

The authors’ binary view also contrasts with the emerging view of the Department of Defense (DoD), captured in the Joint Staff’s draft manual on campaigns and operations, which notes that “competition is its own unique, challenging, and indefinite contest for influence, position, and leverage”; which describes a concept of campaigning that explicitly can take place below the threshold of armed conflict; and which explains that the most “successful competitor accomplishes its aims without invading, occupying, or destroying other regimes, but rather subordinating them.”

Moreover, Stoker and Whiteside are somewhat inconsistent in their complaint that the terms are “fashionable” (which suggests contemporary), and yet that there is “nothing new” about them. Discussions about hybrid war have become “fashionable” again because the activities associated with that concept continue to occur, and because Americans needed to refresh their memories. Russia was

revving up its disinformation bots to sow divisions within our democracy, China was continuing its aggressive theft of intellectual property, and North Korea kept hacking U.S. databases. In recent years, policy analysts and historians had a chance to remind policy makers—many of whom are too young even to remember the Cold War(!)—that while these types of activities may not be new, they warrant fresh study in the current context.

UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

Second, precisely because our key competitors have developed a body of thinking related to the gray zone, there is reason enough to study these concepts. A central part of strategy—whether military or grand—is the need to understand “the other,” the object of the strategy. This creates the dialectic inherent in the way strategy unfolds and the adaptations that must be made along the way. The concept of “red teaming” is based on this need to adapt and update, depending on how an adversary responds.² Zachary Shore’s excellent book *A Sense of the Enemy* describes the need to develop strategic empathy—the “skill of stepping out of our own heads and into the minds of others.”³

Activities such as political subversion, cyber-enabled economic theft, and control over lines of communication (to mention just a few) are part of our competitors’ playbooks; understanding the range of these activities can help American leaders, policy analysts, and private-sector decision makers develop a more realistic picture of the geopolitical landscape. However imperfect these terms are, they describe an important part of the lexicons of our adversaries and competitors, and how they think about strategy, competition, and war.

In recent years, General Valery Gerasimov, Russia’s chief of the General Staff, captured the essence of Russia’s thinking about hybrid and gray-zone activities. His 2013 article, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight,” describes the blending of political, economic, and military power exerted against adversaries.⁴ The scholar Dima Adamsky explained that Russia’s concept of *warfare* has as its conceptual core “an amalgamation of hard and soft power across various domains, through skillful application of coordinated military, diplomatic, and economic tools.” Other experts have explained that key characteristics of this type of war include the idea of *persistence*, which breaks down the traditional binary delineation between war and peace, since hybrid strategies are “always underway.”⁵ Even though some analysts criticize those who read too much into Gerasimov’s view, the fact is that Russia thinks about and develops operational concepts that use a range of nonkinetic tools that fall below the threshold of conventional conflict to shape strategic outcomes.⁶

China too operates in the gray zone. Its range of activities includes not only those that are overtly military, such as military intimidation, but others within

the political and economic domains, such as the co-opting of state-affiliated businesses, information operations, lawfare and diplomacy, and economic coercion.⁷ Experts have described the “five shades” of China’s gray-zone strategies.⁸

In his recent book *The Dragons and the Snakes*, strategist David Kilcullen observes that there are specific, sequenced activities that take place in a “liminal warfare campaign.”⁹ He describes *liminal warfare* as competition at the “threshold” of war and advocates learning from our adversaries, to include Russian notions of *decisive shaping* and *creative ambiguity*.¹⁰ Kilcullen explains that China’s expanded conception of *warfare* includes “mobilizing multiple dimensions of national power outside the traditional military-owned domains.” He urges Western countries to do better at conceptualizing these domains and organizing within them.

The gray zone might sit uncomfortably between war and peace, but that is due to *our* narrowly defined constructs of war and peace; our competitors are more flexible. When Stoker and Whiteside argue that these techniques are not real or legitimate, they inadvertently show how hybrid operators exploit the rigidity of our conventional concepts to achieve an advantage before we even understand what they are doing. Continued study and awareness of these concepts can help us avoid getting caught off guard.

PERPETUAL WAR?

A third reason for thinking twice about discarding these concepts is that contemporary democracies are uncomfortable with operating in a state of perpetual war. In our democracy, it will be a long time, if ever, before organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will think of their activities as a part of war. Yet USAID’s tools and instruments of aid can be as strategically important as the movement of an aircraft carrier. Forcing the range of strategically meaningful hybrid activities to fit into the category of war is simply not accurate, and demanding that they stay within the construct of peace avoids a consideration of the competitive element of these nonkinetic instruments. Moreover, this binary view detracts from the ongoing imperative that individuals *outside* our military and intelligence structures play important roles in the competitions we now face. The *gray zone* concept, while imperfect, captures the continuum of competition in which other parts of our democracy must engage.

And that is a good thing. It gives a broader group of Americans a stake in this competition. In a democracy, a whole-of-government approach requires improving and deploying a set of important activities that fall below the threshold of violence. In democracies such as the United States and its allies and partners, it is impractical to think of key economic, political, and informational activities as a part of war. It has been hard enough to inject a more competitive mind-set

into nonmilitary and nonintelligence agencies! It is difficult to imagine that our diplomats at the State Department or our experts at the Departments of Energy and Agriculture ever will see themselves as being in a continual state of war; they are much more likely to understand the competitive space we face.

In addition, since so many required U.S. capabilities are tied to different congressional authorities, the “all war” construct does not work within our legislative branch, where committees and authorities that shape our nonmilitary instruments are not the same as those that control our defense or intelligence agencies. Yet we must ensure that other U.S. government agencies remain a critical part of the campaign to protect the country from subversion, precisely because, as the authors state, while neither Russia nor China is at war with the United States, “both constantly practice forms of subversion against the United States, such as meddling in political campaigns and all forms of hacking.”

Many of the elements required to prevail in long-term competition with China are not in the hands or within the purview of DoD. These include the many activities and tools within the economic domain, from understanding how China uses our capital markets to its advantage, to forced tech transfers, to supply-chain vulnerabilities. We could lose the “war” without violence, before DoD was even involved. Conceptualizing *gray zone* or *hybrid warfare* is not an effort to create an “illogical, imaginary category of war” but rather a recognition that departments and agencies beyond DoD, as well as businesses and academia, have a role to play.

The strategist Colin Gray, who passed away recently, was correct in his observation that the United States often lacked the “extreme patience” required to achieve its political goals. He attributed this impatience to public pressure to achieve swift, decisive victories. He explained that “time is a weapon, [and] the mindset needed to combat an enemy who is playing a long game is not one that comes naturally to the American soldier or, for that matter, to the American public.” Achieving long-term political goals is the reason that states engage in this long game—one that entails a range of competitions that fall below the threshold of violence—even if this constant campaigning fits only imperfectly into our intellectual constructs.

NOTES

1. Nadia Schadlow, “Peace and War: The Space Between,” *War on the Rocks*, 18 August 2014, warontherocks.com/.
2. See Micah Zenko, *Red Teaming: How to Succeed by Thinking like the Enemy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).
3. Zachary Shore, *A Sense of the Enemy: The High-Stakes History of Reading Your Rival's Mind* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), p. 2.
4. Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations as a Form of War,” *New York Times*, 2 March 2019, www.nytimes.com/.

5. Adamsky's descriptions are cited in Michael Kofman, "The Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, 21 November 2019, warontherocks.com/.
6. Michael Kofman, "Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts," *War on the Rocks*, 11 March 2016, warontherocks.com/.
7. Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016).
8. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Five Shades of Chinese Gray-Zone Strategy," *National Interest*, 2 May 2017, nationalinterest.org/.
9. David Kilcullen, *The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020).
10. See also his article, David Kilcullen, "The Evolution of Unconventional Warfare," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019), pp. 61–71.